Tripura Adivasi Mahila Samity: A pioneer in voluntary services

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Tripura Adivasi Mahila Samity has vindicated its existence in many ways, the most pronounced of them being its activities in the areas of education, income generation, drinking water in rural areas and empowerment of women and tribal communities. The author has given a fairly detailed account of its services to the people.

Background:

It was mainly after Independence of India mainly that the process commenced to integrate state of Tripura with Indian union. Efforts were made by a group of tribal women to organize the women of Tripura with special reference to the tribal welfare. Although the size, shape and geographical location of the state stand in the way of speedy development activities, the initiatives based on the available local resources, physical and financial, were undertaken.

Considering the need of reaching out, the team decided to impart education to women first and direct their efforts towards the organization of tribal women of Tripura. As a first step a night school was started, named as Madhu Madhabi Naisha Bidyalaya, and later on, it undertook to teach adult tribal women. In order to support these motivated tribal women the team also started child nutrition center to look after the health and development of their children.

The continuation of the education and nutrition programme has reflected that imparting education alone will not help the motivated women to continue their work for a longer period. The attempts were therefore made to introduce activities that can provide a little income to these women. Activities like embroidery, weaving, etc., were introduced, which do not require major investments.

The progress of the development initiatives finally guided the team in acquiring a legal identity under which they could undertake organized actions for overall development of the tribal women of Tripura. Accordingly, the formal establishment of the Tripura Adibashi Mahila Samity took place during mid 1964. It gained legal identity on September 25, 1964, and since then the Samity is working for the all-round development of tribal women of Tripura for a little more than 40 years.

The involvement and reach of the Samity in the tribal area and among the tribal population were marked by various developmental actions starting from providing drinking water, organizing coaching classes for the tribal students, imparting skills training, starting income generation activities, provision of shelter etc. etc.

The dedicated service of the Samity has been recognized with several prestigious memberships, affiliations and awards. Responding to the present needs of development services, the initiatives of the Samity are not restricted to services in any particular direction, but it is extending its dedicated services in three more areas, namely education, income generation and women empowerment to ensure sustainable development of the tribal & non-tribal women of Tripura.

Operation:

The operation of the Tripura Adibashi Mahila Samity is mainly based on the implementation of the following development programmes:

1) Educational Programmes
2) Women Empowerment Programmes
3) Livelihood Development Programmes
4) Cultural Programme and
5) Women & Tribal Development Programmes

**Educational Programmes:**

The educational programmes of the Samity are confined in three directions, namely to enable the tribal girls and boys, youth and women to stand on their own feet. The main intention is to generate awareness and provide minimum formal education to the new generation tribal youths. Initiatives have also been taken to organize technical education for income generation by imparting training to have alternative means to earn and maintain sustainable livelihood.

The details of the educational programmes of the Samity are as follows:

a) **Condensed Course for Madhyamik Drop-out Tribal Girls:**

The Samity is running three residential coaching centres for the Madhyamik drop-out tribal girls. These are situated at Pragati Road, Shyamali Bazar and Belbari. Tribal girls, who have dropped out from their regular studies due to various reasons, get chance to continue their studies up to Madhyamik standard. This programme has been introduced with the assistance of Directorate of Tribal Welfare, Govt. of Tripura.

The drop-out tribal girls also get the opportunity to stay for nearly eight months in the Samity’s hostel and prepare themselves for appearing in the Madhyamik/ Secondary examination. During 2003-2004, the Samity accommodated a total of 200 girls in three coaching centres out of which 169 girls appeared for the examination. The result confirms 66.3% success rate with 107 girls becoming recipient of pass certificate.

This year the Samity has also accommodated a total of 180 tribal drop-out girl students (at Krishnanagar 100, Shyamalibazar-20 and Belbari 60) and is continuing its efforts to build the educational capacity of these students.

b) **Pre-Primary School for the Children:**

The Samity is also running a pre-primary school for the children, namely Anurupan Sishu Sikha Kendra on its Krishnanagar campus. The school has a capacity to accommodate only 25 students in classes KG-I & KG-II in the English and Bengali subjects. This Kendra is an educational centre of Directorate of Social Education and Welfare run in collaboration with the Samity.

**Women Empowerment Programmes:**

Normally, any tribal woman is burdened with the responsibilities of serving the other members of her family and depends on the earnings of the male member. Besides, those who get chances to work in offices find it difficult to continue working due to lack of basic facilities like safe and secure residence.

Similarly, it is also the women who at times find it difficult to stay even at their own houses due to poverty and family quarrels. The experience of the Samity is that the aged and unskilled women are facing these problems more often; the provision of additional income can solve this problem.

To tackle these problems, the Samity has initiated following actions to enable interested and suffering women to utilize their spare times in some creative work that can fetch income.

a) Awareness generation.

b) Run Working Women’s Hostel.

c) Run Short Stay Home for the Destitute.

a) **Awareness Generation:** The objective of the Samity is to organize particularly the tribal women who are unable to attract attention of the society for their development. The Samity is, therefore, initiating action to generate awareness for better survival among women suffering due to lack of basic information.

b) **Working Women’s Hostel:** The Samity also realised the need of safe and secure accommodation for the working women who are away from their families for earning or acquiring some skills for their future or career. To support these working women, the Samity is running a hostel at Krishnanagar, Agartala, to accommodate 20 working women.
c) Short Stay Home: To support the destitute women, the Samity is also running a Short-Stay-Home at Shamili Bazar, Agartala. It has a capacity to accommodate 25 such inmates who are beaten, tortured and are aged, facing a lot of trouble due to ignorance and lack of means to support their families in crisis.

During their stay, the Samity imparts skill training on various income generation activities that can lead them to earn their livelihood and support their families. Central Social Welfare Board through All India Women Conference, New Delhi, is providing necessary financial assistance.

d) Creche Programme: Focusing the present role of women to fulfil the financial needs of the family as well as to maintain the mother-child relationship, the Samity has introduced Creche programmes at Agartala and in Mohampur Tea Estates area. Nearly 150 children below 6 years are being looked after in these Creches. The Central Social Welfare Board and Agartala Municipal Council provide financial support to run these Creches.

Livelihood Development Programme:

The T.A.M.S. is also working towards self-development of the tribal and rural women of Tripura. It extends its services for organizing them into groups and then provides support services to take up group-based activities for economic development.

Accordingly, the Samity has organized four different livelihood development programmes as mentioned below:-

a) Self Help Group Promotion
b) Income Generation
c) Marketing Service and
d) Linkages Development.

a) Self Help Group Promotion: The main cause of slow economic development in the rural areas of Tripura where women are affected is largely the geographical location of the state and insufficient means to generate income for their stable livelihood. Due to lack of big industries the working population of Tripura are opting for small and cottage-based industries for economic development.

This has prompted the rural women of Tripura to start activities based on the resources available around them. Experiencing these strategies, the Samity has introduced systematic development initiatives to organize them into Self-Help-Groups (SHGs) and assist their leaders to run successful SHGs for initiation of successful economic development.

The volunteers of the Samity start their actions with the selection of the area, people and assessment of the resources to be utilized for the development of these SHGs. Finally, introduction of the income generation activities including the provision for imparting skill training, will lead them towards their sustainable development. The entire process will lead these SHGs towards channelizing a regular flow of income for sustainable development and suitable recognition and social status in their respective families, communities and in the society.

In accordance with the above stated strategies, the Samity has organized more than 110 SHGs, each consisting of 10 to 18 persons, which, in other words, ensure total coverage of 855 persons during the year (tribal & non-tribal women) under the programme.

Considering the necessity of completing the documentation for SHGs inclusive of recording their financial affairs, the Samity has organized three training programmes for the group leaders of the SHGs and also undertaken field visits to have practical exposure with the leaders and members of the successful SHGs within and outside the districts. NABARD has sanctioned financial assistance for training of the SHG leaders.

b) Marketing Service: The T.A.M.S. is also extending its support for marketing the products of the individual weavers and SHGs. It is also participating in various Exhibitions and Melas to market the products and is receiving order from different Government Directorates and Departments, Government of Tripura, to supply these exclusive tribal products.
These exclusive products are not only serving the purpose of marketing to provide economic benefits to the individual weavers and SHGs, but it is also projecting the tribal culture of Tripura.

Running a canteen for tribal foods in various Exhibitions and Melas is a unique and exclusive initiative of the Samity. The Samity is also receiving specialized supply orders from various Govt. Departments for the supply of tribal food items on different formal occasions.

c) Income Generation Programme: The T.A.M.S. has adopted systematic approaches to exploit the potential of the SHGs for starting income generating activities and provide necessary support services to their group members for economic benefits. The Samity is extending services to organize practical and technical programme to impart such training as can ensure the generation of income on a regular basis.

Following are the few trades on which the Samity has organized training programmes for its SHGs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trades</th>
<th>Training Programmes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animal Husbandry</td>
<td>a) Piggery, b) Goaterly, c) Poultry and d) Duckery.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Handloom</td>
<td>a) Tribal and b) Traditional handloom weaving.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Handicrafts</td>
<td>a) Bamboo, b) Jute craft work, c) Candle making, d) Silk Screen &amp; Thermocol works.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cutting &amp; Tailoring</td>
<td>a) Tribal &amp; Non-Tribal dress making, b) Office folders making, c) Embroidered table cloth, bed spread etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>a) Vermiculture, composite farming, Mushroom Cultivation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>a) Fast food making, b) Fruit processing etc.</td>
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The effect of the above income generation training programmes is reflected in the activities of the individual members of the SHGs.

The Samity is also recognized by CAPART as Technical Agency to impart training on construction of Rain Water Harvesting Tanks (RWHT).

With the growth/progress and the expansion of the activities of these SHGs, and the requirement of regular amount of financial resources, the Samity is now taking initiatives to route some structured government programmes for these SHGs, involving the local banks, financial institutions and development funding agencies.

The Samity is also depending on the commercial and regional banks and various government agencies to channelize such support after fulfilling their necessary criteria for establishment of desired credit linkages for these SHGs.

World Bank Aided Women & Tribal Development Programme:

The Tripura component of the World Bank Aided Rubber Project (WBAIRP) envisages a Women & Tribal Development Plan (W&TDP) aimed towards overall development of the tribals covered under Rubber plantation. Major focus of W&TDP was to generate additional income from non-rubber economic activities.

As a partner organization for the implementation of the stated project, the Samity was shouldering the responsibilities for organizing tribal rubber growers into groups in three districts, namely (1) West, (2) North and (3) Dhalai Districts of Tripura. The Samity starts its action with detailed household survey to select the eligible families under W&TDP and slowly organizes them into Rubber Producers’ Group (RPG). Women Thrift Group (WTG), Mailuma Group in West district, and Tiari Group in North & Dhalai districts are other forms of SHGs employing the participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques as shown below:-

The Samity has undertaken various social activities like organizing health camps, literacy classes and other activities to drive them towards small savings to start some income generating
activities. To support such activities the Samity is also organizing technical training and awareness generation programmes as per the need of these groups.

The Samity also makes efforts to create community-based infrastructure, i.e., community hall and rain water tanks. It ensures the desired output of the project.

**Jan Shiksan Sansthan, Agartala :-**

Ministry of HRD, New Delhi, sanctioned Jan Shiksan Sansthan in favour of Tripura Adibashi Mahila Samity during the year 2003-2004 for imparting vocational training to the neo-literates, illiterates and educated unemployed youth. During 2004-2005 the JSS, Agartala, has conducted training for 422 persons in different activities which have helped the trainees to start their income generation.

**Conclusion : -**

Tripura Adibashi Mahila Samity acknowledges the help received from its sponsors, well wishers, donors and various departments of the state and Central government for extending all kinds of financial, physical and social supports towards successful implementation of its programmes and activities. Without these supports, the Samity would not have been able to organize its development projects/programmes as per the target laid down.

*The author herself belongs to a tribal community of Tripura and is the secretary of Tripura Adivasi Mahila Samiti at present.*